

LITERACY ADVANCE OF HOUSTON

CLEAR & TO THE POINT:
THE IMPORTANCE OF USING PLAIN LANGUAGE



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Literacy Advance of Houston

Mission:
Transforming lives and communities
through the doorway of literacy.



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Setting the stage

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There's *plain language*, and
then there's *plainer language*...



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www.nih.gov/clearcommunication/plainlanguage

Special thanks to the National Institutes of Health,
whose website and plain language information were both
helpful and influential as we learned about this topic!

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Today's session:

What is plain language?

What is it not?

Why is plain language important?

How can we incorporate plain language into our activities?



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What is plain language?
What is it not?

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Plain language IS:

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Language that effectively communicates with the **specific audience being addressed**.



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Plain language IS:

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Grammatically correct language that includes complete sentence structure and accurate word usage.



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Plain language IS:

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Clear writing and speaking that tells the reader exactly what they need to know, without unnecessary words or confusing expressions.



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Plain language is NOT:

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- Unprofessional writing or speaking.
- A method of “dumbing down” or “talking down” to the reader or listener.



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Plain language is NOT:

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A one-size-fits-all formula
in which there is only ONE
right way to say things!

*Speaking and writing plainly
is an intentional **approach**
that we adopt in order to
help those around us.*

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*Why is plain
language
important?*

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Communicating
clearly is
its own reward!



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You may not know
when someone is struggling
to understand.



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*Why is plain
language
important for US?*

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SUMMER SHOT BLITZ

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*How can we
incorporate plain
language into our
activities?*

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AIMS & AUDIENCE

Complication
=/
Importance

Get rid of verbal “fluff”
Avoid idioms

Pay attention to:

- Word choices
- Verb forms
- Structure & layout
- Visuals



The Ten Commandments of Plain Language





WORD CHOICES:

1. Use common, everyday words.

When technical terms are necessary, make sure they are defined. Avoid acronyms.

Repeat in different words.





	
so	accordingly
later	at a later date
use	utilize
if	in the event that
can	be able to
When can you come to class?	When might you be available for classes?

WORD CHOICES:

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2. Use “we”, “you”, and other personal pronouns.
Try to avoid the third person.

	
we	the Agency/the Staff
you	all clients/learners
when you come back to class	students returning to class
please talk to us	contact a member of staff

WORD CHOICES:

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3. Use positive, rather than negative, words and try to avoid exceptions.

	
Please come to class every week. If you miss too many sessions we will take you out of the class.	Failure to attend class on a regular basis could result in the termination of your enrolment.
If you are over 18 years of age, you should...	All persons except those under 18 years of age should...

**NOTE: The negative can be appropriate if you're cautioning the reader, as in: "Don't bring children to class."*


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WORD CHOICES:

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4. Avoid idioms and other words or phrases that could be confusing to a non-native English speaker.


Pay attention to numbers.

	
Free immunization for children!	Summer shot blitz
You can come to our office any time.	Everyone is welcome to drop by the office any time.
On December 1.	On December first.
Take a brochure when you go.	Grab a brochure on your way out.
Your test score shows us that you are ready to graduate.	You've tested out of our programs.

WORD CHOICES:

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5. Remember that “shorter” often equals “better” – but not always! Try to choose words that have the most universal recognition.


information
computer
OK
class
student
free

VERB FORMS:

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6. Use the active voice,
and avoid the passive voice
wherever possible.



	
We will contact you.	You will be contacted by a Literacy Advance staff member.
We will grade your test.	Your test will be graded.
Please complete your form.	All forms should be completed.
Look at the Student Bulletin Board for more information.	Further details can be found on the Student Bulletin Board.

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VERB FORMS:

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7. Use action verbs.
Action verbs are short and direct.
Talk directly to your readers –
use imperatives when appropriate.

	
consider	give consideration to
applies to	is applicable to
attend	be in attendance
Fill in your registration form carefully.	All students should be careful when filling in their registration form.
Come to class on Tuesday.	Classes will commence on Tuesday.

VERB FORMS:

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8. Use the simple present tense.
Avoid complicated verb forms
when you can.
Avoid the “-ing” form wherever
possible.

	
Please tell us if you change your address.	Students who have changed their address must contact Literacy Advance.
You must call the Student Absence Voicemail if you will miss class.	All students who are going to miss class should first call the Student Absence Voicemail.
When will you come back to class?	When do you think you'll be coming back to class?
When can you come?	When do you think you'll be able to make an appointment?

STRUCTURE AND LAYOUT:

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9. Use logical layout, including parallel construction and easy-to-read design features such as bullets and tables.

	
When you come to class, you should always:	When you come to class, you should always:
- Come on time	- Be punctual
- Sign in at the front desk	- Don't go into the room early
- Wait in the lobby	- The staff will decide when the class is full

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STRUCTURE AND LAYOUT:

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10. Use plain fonts, avoiding distortions such as ALL-CAPS, *italics* and underlining. Pay attention to white space and line breaks.

Develop consistent use of visuals and other helpful images.



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Wrap-up:

*Questions, comments,
discussion...*

THANK YOU!
GO FORTH AND SPEAK
PLAINLY!



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